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ABSTRACT

Because problems such as rape are often viewed as personal concerns of "la familia" there is great tendency on the part of Hispanics to accept this crime as something that must be resolved without intervention from the police, the hospitals or the courts. Seldom will much needed therapy and auxillary type services be sought due to the extreme sense of embarrassment that such an act has caused the entire family. Historically and even today, Hispanic families seem to have responded to this threat by keeping female members close to the home or with an official escort. Thus, the Hispanic woman is taught to see the world as threatening and to maintain a cautious attitude. Reactions of Hispanic rape victims are consistent with their cultural and religious heritage and their own personal belief systems. If women are to fully combat this social cancer then they must do so with understanding, determination, vigor and unrestrained perseverance. Hispanic intensity must be seen in the eyes and felt in the hearts of every Hispanic "mujer" who feels for her sisters who have been rape victims. Women can help themselves and the time for action is now. (AN)

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RAPE WITHIN THE HISPANIC FAMILY UNIT

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"If there is much pain in life, all the more reason that it should appear in a class of literature which, in its highest form, is a sincere transcription of life. It is the complaint of the coward, this cry against the novel with a purpose, because it brings the tragedies and griefs of others to notice."

—Frank Norris
Essays on Authorship

"Our culture has been used and exploited in many ways, but the dichos that tell us that hardships teach and that strength emerges out of fire do not lie...Courage and clarity are needed, and if ever the teachings of the past applied to the progeny of the future, it is here and now."

—Isabelle Navar, Ph.D.
Agenda Magazine, 1974

The pain associated with rape, whether direct or indirect, is indeed a transcription of life. For women of all ages, all cultures, all economic levels and all religious beliefs, the act of rape is one of acute violence. In every sense of the word, it is a brutal exploitation of human dignity, self-esteem and moral fiber. To the victim, an act of rape incurs severe effects. To society, rape is a form of violence that reflects the true tragedy of our society. Historically, the violation of an individual's rights and personal life has been a struggle of endless suffering. No one issue of human rights and human violation is more painful, more devastating; however, than that of the rape victim. It is an issue that borders on legal, social, moral, and human suffering. To any human being affected by human suffering, it is an issue that yearns for attention and remedy.

The degrading and humiliating effects of this act of stealing are devastating. For too long, the act has wrongfully been viewed as one of passion or perverted behavior. Rather, we have come to view it for what it truly is: An extreme act of violence. We know too for example, that 75% of all "one-person" rapes are planned (that is, the rapist is aware of his victim's daily routines or is an acquaintance). Sadly enough, victims have ranged from 10 months to 93 years of age. And, understandably, as many as 10 rapes occur for every case that is actually reported. Of added significance is the fact that rape, la violacion sexual, has increased by 23% over the last five years.

The upsurge in rape cases has undoubtedly scarred the lives and worlds of anyone who has experienced the act or knows of someone who has experienced such an act. Women of all cultures have a common denominator that has been threaded by fear, uncertainty, and tension. Compounding the problem, is the stark reality of added pressure upon a rape victim regarding legal aspects of her trauma. The literature is abound with cases of insensitivity on the part of police, the courts and the entire legal system concerning a rape victim. Unattended have been the various notions of cultural factors that often times affect a woman's reactions to soliciting help from the police, indentifying her assailant, and forging forward for a conviction. The cultural factors concerning the Chicana female in our society are of particular interest to our research and examination.

A basic lack of research into the issue of rape among Hispanic females and insight into such concerns as social norms, difficulties and sensitivities, effects on the family network and other relative issues has somewhat prevented knowledge into this area. However, to admit to the serious nature

of the issue and its lack of needed research does not justify its exclusion from discussion or warrant disconcern. Because problems such as rape are often times viewed as personal concerns of "la familia" there is great tendency on the part of Hispanics to accept this crime as something internal that must therefore, be resolved without intervention from any foreign structure such as the police, the hospitals or the courts.

The concern for stringent morality on the part of the female prevents necessary intervention. La familia accepts the disruptions and difficulties of an act of rape upon one of its members with grave insult and suffering. Seldom however, will much needed therapy and auxillary type services be sought due to the extreme sense of embarrassment that such an act has caused the entire family. Such a behavior may not be as likely with a more assimilated or newer generation Hispanic family unit.

¹Within our society, there are more Hispanics living in family units. The strength of the Hispanic family lies in its ability to provide for its members----security, identity and well-being, thus not diminishing individual responsibility but increasing it. Because of the importance of the family as a social unit, if either the male or female fails in his or her respective role obligations, the family as a whole suffers.

Rape, among Hispanics, drastically affects the entire family unit. Historically and even today, Hispanic families seem to have responded to this threat by keeping female members close to the safety of their homes. In many cases, women have not been allowed to leave their homes without an escort. Thus, the Hispanic women has been taught to see the world as threatening and to maintain a cautious attitude.

Confusion, shame, fear, dishonor and depression are normal feelings for the victim. The sexual aspect of the crime is usually her primary concern; the loss of virginity (especially to adolescents). A particularly damaging psychological reaction may occur if the Hispanic victim becomes pregnant and if abortion is not an option to her due to her family's cultural and religious beliefs. These immediate reactions, are followed by pronounced anger, self pity, sense of guilt, anxiety, worthlessness, isolation and distrust. These psychological reactions of the victim, may persist in expressing affection relating sexually and/or relating to her family.

Rape is always a serious injury against the victim's emotions and usually causes fear and mental torment for many years, often a lifetime. Many women feel that the worse part of being raped is the loss of control, especially when that loss has been brought about by such a violent experience. Rape is undeniably a way of hurting and degrading women in a very aggressive and brutal way. One could safely say that ^rape is a senseless and cowardly act, in which many victims end up with a feeling of insecurity, guilt, disgust and shame.

Reactions of Hispanic victims are consistent with their cultural heritage and their own personal belief systems. ²For a woman to be raped is to dishonor or disgrace not only herself, because she may not have resisted enough, but her family as well, (because the female has little identity apart from her family). Most Hispanic women have been taught to believe that if they are raped it is because they are somehow sinful and consequently are getting what they deserve. ³Traditionally, the Catholic Church has contributed to the sexually and racially tiered arrangement: (1) by idolizing womanhood in the image of the Virgin Mary; (2) by defining the woman's "place" as in the home, subservient to her husband and (3) by its official stance on birth control. The church has taught that the "ideal" woman is male-identified because she is

venerated for her roles as wife and mother. A woman's virginity and sexual integrity is not her own but belongs to a man and to dishonor her is to dishonor him. The idea of rape is believed to be God's punishment, for most Hispanic victims not realizing that most rapes are preplanned. Many religious teachings are still quite conservative. Again for example, Catholicism believes a woman should not submit to forcible sex and should be willing to suffer whatever consequence may occur, even if this means that her only alternative to submission may mean death. But those who submit and consequently show little or no sign of physical trauma are judged as somehow guilty, even though submission does not necessarily imply consent.

Rape trials are often unique, in that the burden of proof on the victim is dual---not only must she prove the defendant is guilty, she must prove her own innocence. A victim's sense of dignity, is often times violated when she is treated more as an offender than the rapist is. ⁴Often blamed for the attack is the victims' dress (suggestive), behavior (provocative), or her whereabouts (a bar or rough neighborhood). There are still indications that societal attitudes do not understand that rape is a vicious and degrading crime. Throughout history, women have been the objects of sexual and economic exploitation. Today, cigarette manufacturers, the liquor and clothing industry and household products heavily exploit female sexuality through their widespread advertising campaigns. ⁵Our legal system is clearly structured to maintain women in a position subservient to men. This exploitation constitutes a form of "institutional violence" against women that is tolerated, especially when it is profitable, thus implicitly condoning violence against women on an individual level as in the case of rape.

Dr. Navar's statement concerning the "exploitation of our culture" rings out with vibrant echoes of a reality that daily infringes on every Chicana or Hispanic female who is sexually violated or raped. If we are to fully combat this social cancer then surely we must do so with understanding, determination, vigor and unrestrained perserverance. The intensity that is so natural to our culture must be seen in the eyes and felt in the hearts of every Hispanic mujer who feels for her sisters, her hermanas Chicanas who have been rape victims. Ours is by no means a unique affliction. For every woman lives with the dreaded fear of rape. We can, however, help ourselves. We are dealing with an issue that has destroyed women, careers, families, and human lives. Our racial struggle is blessed at times, with strength, endurance, and emotional bonding. If ever these ingredients were needed among nosotras, then surely it is upon us, it is now!

FOOTNOTES

1. Holmes, K.A. and Williams, J.E. Rape: The Public View--The Personal Experience. This study was supported by a grant that was provided by the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape. Rockville, Maryland. pp. 55-79
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Garcia, C., Guerra, C.D., Mendez, I. and Mercado, M. "La Violacion Sexual--The Reality of Rape".
5. Ibid.